

# Benin

It's surprising that Benin rings so few bells in people's geographical awareness when its role in history is so significant. The birthplace of voodoo and a pivotal platform of the slave trade for nearly three centuries, Benin is steeped in a rich and complex history still very much in evidence across the country.

A visit to this small, club-shaped nation could therefore not be complete without exploring the Afro-Brazilian heritage of Ouidah and Porto Novo, shivering at the litany of massacres of the kings of Dahomey or learning about spirits and fetishes in Ouidah and Lake Ahémé.

But Benin will also wow visitors with its natural beauty, from the palm-fringed beach idyll of the Atlantic coast to the rugged scenery of the north. The Parc National de la Pendjari is one of the best wildlife parks in West Africa. Lions, cheetahs, leopards, elephants and hundreds of other species thrive here, and the infrastructure to see them is remarkably good.

In fact, Benin is wonderfully tourist friendly compared to most of its neighbours. There are good roads, reliable intercity bus services, professional guides to tour the country with and ecotourism initiatives that offer travellers the chance to delve deeper into Beninese life: how does learning traditional fishing techniques or sleeping in a *tata somba* house sound?

Finally, Benin's economic capital Cotonou may not be a love-at-first-sight sort of place, but spend a Sunday afternoon chilling out in Fidjrossé, hanging out at the daring Fondation Zinsou or bargaining hard at the Dantokpa market and you'll soon find the big smoke has its perks, too.

## FAST FACTS

- **Area** 112,622 sq km
- **ATMs** Available in Cotonou and Parakou
- **Borders** Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, Togo
- **Budget** US\$30 to US\$50 per day
- **Capital** Porto Novo
- **Languages** French, Fon, Yoruba, Dendi, Aja; more than 50 in total
- **Money** West African CFA franc; US\$1 = CFA463, €1 = CFA656
- **Population** 6.7 million
- **Seasons** Wet (April to October), dry (November to March)
- **Telephone** Country code ☎ 229; international access code ☎ 00
- **Time** GMT/UTC +1
- **Visas** CFA10,000 at border, 30-day extension CFA12,000



**HOW MUCH?**

- **Guided ecowalk** US\$6.50
- **Mashed yam** US\$0.40
- **Appliqué hat** US\$3.20
- **Zemi-john** US\$0.40
- **National park entry** US\$21.50

**LONELY PLANET INDEX**

- **1L petrol** US\$0.65 to US\$1.30
- **1.5L bottled water** US\$1
- **Bottle of La Béninoise beer** US\$0.55
- **Souvenir T-shirt** \$4.30
- **Aloko** US\$0.20

**HIGHLIGHTS**

- **The Atakora Region** (p257) Explore the rugged landscapes of northern Benin.
- **Lake Ahémé** (p254) Learn traditional fishing techniques and get up close and personal with voodoo traditions.
- **Parc National de la Pendjari** (p257) Spot lions, cheetahs, elephants and more in West Africa's best wildlife park.
- **Porto Novo** (p252) Discover Benin's melow capital, with its Afro-Brazilian heritage and visionary sustainable farming centre.
- **Grand Popo** (p254) Relax on Benin's beautiful, palm-fringed coast

**CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO**

In southern Benin, there are two rainy seasons: April to mid-July, and mid-September to late October. The rains in the north fall from June to early October. Harmattan winds billow out of the Sahara between December and March, and the hottest time of the year is from February to April. The coolest, driest time to visit is between November and February.

Smaller roads throughout Benin may be impassable during the rainy seasons; notably those in the wildlife parks.

**ITINERARIES**

- **One Week** Start off in busy Cotonou (p247), where good food, cold beers, great markets and insane traffic give you a taste of things to come. Porto Novo

(p252), the tranquil capital, and Ganvié (p252), the lacustrine stilt village, are both within two hours' taxi journey of Cotonou. A little further along the country's main roads are two historical highlights: Abomey (p255), home to the ruined palaces of the kings of Dahomey, and Ouidah (p253), once a capital of the slave trade and now the centre of voodoo worship.

- **Two Weeks** After a few days in Cotonou, put your bags down at lovely Grand Popo (p254) for a couple of idle days, before heading north via the stunning shores of Lake Ahémé (p254). Then head to Abomey via Lokossa, and on to Natitingou (p256), gateway to the beautiful Atakora region (p257) and the Parc National de la Pendjari (p257).

**HISTORY**

More than 350 years ago the area now known as Benin was split into numerous principalities. Akaba of Abomey conquered his neighbouring ruler Dan and called the new kingdom Dan-Homey, later shortened to Danhomey by French colonisers. By 1727, Dahomey spread from Abomey down to Ouidah and Cotonou and into parts of modern Togo. The kingdoms of Nikki, Djougou and Parakou were still powerful in the north as was the Kingdom of Toffa in Porto-Novo.

Each king pledged to leave his successor more land than he inherited, achieved by waging war with his neighbours. They grew rich by selling slaves to the European traders, notably the Portuguese, who established trading posts in Porto Novo, Ouidah and along the coast. For more than a century, an average of 10,000 slaves per year were shipped to the Americas. Southern Dahomey was dubbed the Slave Coast.

Following colonisation by the French, great progress was made in education, and many Dahomeyans were employed as government advisers throughout French West Africa.

**Independence & Le Folklore**

When Dahomey became independent in 1960, other former French colonies started deporting their Dahomeyan populations. Back home without work, they were the root of a highly unstable political situation. Three years after independence, following the example of